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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001364

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: SHIA RELIGIOUS SCHOLAR ON WAY OUT OF SADR CRISIS

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Ellen Germain for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: In a meeting on May 1, Sheikh Fateh Keshef al-Ghita, an esteemed Shia religious scholar and informal advisor to the Prime Minister, discussed the ongoing political crisis between the GOI and the Sadrists. Stating that, "The time for talking is over," al-Ghita confirmed that the Prime Minister remained resolute in his decision to clear Sadr City of Special Groups (SG) and other criminal elements. He also expressed concern that there are many within the Sadrist camp who are urging Muqtada al-Sadr to take action, which might prompt MAS to do something foolish and rash. Sheikh Ghita also presented a fascinating profile of MAS, who he claims aspires to be the Iraqi equivalent of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, yet behaves more like a "godfather" than a political leader. In addition, he gave a brief yet cogent analysis of Iran's motives in supporting Sadr, and posited that they are the only ones capable of influencing MAS and ending the current crisis. End Summary.

"The Time for Talking is Over"

12. (C) During a meeting held May 1 at his residence in the International Zone, Poloffs met with Sheikh Fateh Keshef al-Ghita, an esteemed Shia scholar and informal advisor to the PM. Commenting on the ongoing crisis in Sadr City, Sheikh Ghita lamented that though there may have been an opportunity for dialogue in the days following the PM's Monday, April 28, decision to confront the militias and criminal elements in Sadr City, "the time for talking is over." According to Sheikh Ghita, the PM remains firm and resolute in his decision to clear militias and criminal elements out of Sadr City and he will not back down. Worried about the potential for civilian casualties, Sheikh Ghita also expressed his fears that MAS may be pressured into doing something foolish and rash. Noting the growing impatience that is brewing within the Sadrist camp, Sheikh Ghita revealed that even those Sadrists who had previously preached calm and moderation were now calling on MAS to take action. On the bright side, Sheikh Ghita said that MAS's presence in Iran could prevent an escalation of hostilities, as his Iranian hosts have an interest in things remaining calm in Iraq.

13. (C) Turning his attention to the SG, Sheikh Ghita remarked that they differ from JAM. Likening them to AQI, Sheikh Ghita stated that they are well-trained and better-armed, and indicated that they have a strong network of informants and spies within the GOI and the security services. He also appeared worried that they will escalate the situation with the GOI in Sadr City, which will only lead to more suffering among the civilian population. When Poloff commented that despite the difference between JAM and the SG, the two seemed to come together when faced with a common foe, Sheikh Ghita agreed, and said that he worries that the same thing may happen again in Sadr City as the SG forces draw the GOI into a final confrontation.

14. (C) Describing MAS, Sheikh Ghita stated that he aspires to be the Iraqi equivalent of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini. His biggest weakness, though, is his desire to be seen as a "godfather" to all Sadrists, which has led to his being taken advantage of by numerous people both within and outside the Sadrist movement. Sheikh Ghita highlighted the recent fighting in Basrah as a perfect example of this, stating that the GOI said from the beginning of the operation that their fight was not with the Sadrists or JAM, but with the SG and other criminal elements that were operating with impunity in Basrah. Yet, MAS rallied around the SG, claiming them as his own, and soon found himself drawn into the fighting. Declaring that the Sadrists/JAM need to divorce themselves from the SG to avoid being drawn into more fighting, Sheikh Ghita indicated that this was not likely to happen, as he believes MAS supports the SG because he sees himself as their leader, and also because he has a genuine fear of them. Sheikh Ghita also said that there is really no one in MAS's inner circle who could persuade MAS to abandon the SG, as most of his close advisors view him as an exalted, prophet-like figure that they dare not challenge, while others are merely sycophants. To Sheikh Ghita, the Iranians are the only ones who can really influence MAS.

15. (C) Continuing with this theme, Sheikh Ghita said that splitting the SG from the Sadrists is the only way out of the current situation, and the Iranians are the only ones capable of doing this. Echoing an oft-heard analysis of Iran's motives in Iraq, Sheikh Ghita explained that the Iranians do not wish to see a strong Iraqi state emerge

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anytime soon. Iran's intent is to limit the power and efficacy of the central government, while at the same time encouraging the formation of a strong, southern Shia region friendly to Iran. In addition, the Iranians would like to hasten the withdrawal of CF from Iraq. According to Sheikh Ghita, Iran's plans have been stymied, as the CF defeat of AQI and the resulting fragmentation of the Sunni community made the Iranians realize that their Shia proxies would never be able to defeat the CF militarily. More importantly, their ability to influence the political realm also began to diminish, as their one-time allies, ISCI, have grown more independent and less reliant on the Iranians. According to Sheikh Ghita, the IRGC-Quds Force, led by Qassim Suleymani, is playing the lead role in furthering Iran's Iraq policy, and they have been heavily influenced by the anti-Hakim branch of the Badr organization. Though the IRGC-Quds Force has lined up behind the Sadrists, they also have the power to shut them down, which Sheikh Ghita said Suleymani did in the midst of last month's fighting in Basrah following the entreaties of GOI officials.

16. (C) To defuse the situation, Sheikh Ghita said that the GOI should proceed on separate tracks. First, the GOI should accede to some of the Sadrist's demands and release their detainees, which would be seen as a good-faith initiative that could pave the way for further dialogue. At the same time, the GOI should take the fight to the SG in Sadr City to demonstrate that they are serious, while also showing the Sadrists that their fight is with the SG, not the Sadrist movement. While proceeding on these tracks, the GOI needs to work with the Iranians to rein in Sadr and halt SG activities. In Sheikh Ghita's view, the Iranians would like to open channels of dialogue between the CF, GOI, and the Sadrists. Moreover, the Sadrists understand pressure, and when squeezed they will compromise. Yet, Sheikh Ghita warned that the Iranians will not allow the Sadrists to be crushed, as they do not want to see ISCI emerge victorious. However, Sheikh Ghita believes that they also do not want the situation to escalate and are looking for a way to restore calm.

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